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Eric Wiley

University of Texas - Pan American, wileye@utpa.edu

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Play Selection in the Department of Speech and Drama at Pan American University in the 1970s and 1980s: Twenty Years of Excluding Latino Plays

Eric Wiley

The theatre program at the University of Texas–Pan American has a long history of excluding Latino plays from its production seasons, even though the university is located near the Mexican border and the majority of its students are Mexican American. The regional population served by this publicly-funded school, which has been state-funded since 1965, is predominantly Mexican American and Spanish speaking. Furthermore, as reflected in its name, the school’s mission has included for more than half a century a commitment to advance the “blending” of the North American and Latin American cultures. This article reviews the school’s production record over a twenty-year period, from 1970 to 1990, when more than one hundred and fifty full-length plays were produced by its theatre program, not one of which was about Mexican Americans or Mexico. Selected background information is provided to help illuminate the historical context in which the school’s theatre faculty decided year after year to exclude Latino plays from their theatre on the Mexican border.

The theatre program at the University of Texas–Pan American has a long history of excluding Latino plays from its production seasons, even though the school lies just fifteen miles from the Mexican border and serves an overwhelmingly Mexican–American region of the state. The twenty years between 1970 and 1990 provide a worthwhile basis for review, first, as they constitute an extensive period during which successive waves of students passed through the program and, second, they come *after* the civil rights movement had already exposed and vilified ethnicity-based inequalities in American higher education. So, for the record, how many plays staged by the theatre program during this period were Latino? What percentage was Mexican American or Mexican in its authorship or thematic content? Reviewing publicly the facts about the program’s exclusion of Latino plays, at a time when the school (named Pan American University or PAU) was state-funded, is the purpose of this article. The possible motives for the exclusion are but very briefly considered, as are the methods and arguments that were used to make it a reality. Some background information is provided to help illuminate the historical context in which PAU theatre faculty decided year after year to exclude Latino plays from their theatre on the Mexican border.

We begin with the 1970s. Between the spring of 1970 and the fall of 1979, PAU theatre staged a total of sixty-seven plays (all play selection information is based on departmental archives and PAU yearbooks). Of these sixty-seven, only one appears to have had any Latino themes or authorship: *In the Right Hand of God the Father*, by Colombian playwright Enrique Buenaventura, was presented in the fall of '72. One of two other possible exceptions to this decade-long practice of excluding Latino works was a show in the spring of '72 entitled "One Act Play Festival." As no individual titles from this festival appear in departmental records, and no programs for it were found in the UTPA theatre archives, it is possible that one or more of these short plays was Latino. However, references to one-act plays presented at about the time in question, made in interviews published in *Her story: An Oral History of Theatre in the 20th Century at The University of Texas-Pan American*, do not remotely suggest Latino themes (84-89).

Another possible exception to the practice of excluding Latino plays in the '70s at PAU occurred in the spring of '78: A Latino-themed show at the Fine Arts Auditorium entitled *La Pitahaya*. Composed by Carl Seale, a music professor at PAU, this new work was actually an opera, not a play, and originated in the music department. It was "produced by the PAU Opera Workshop" and "presented by the Division of Inter-American Affairs and International Education as a highlight of a week of Pan American Days activities" (*Pan American* 8). Theatre faculty did help to stage the opera, but it was not part of the theatre program's usual four play season; had only three performances; and featured primarily music faculty, music students and student dancers.

In summary, of the sixty-seven, full-length plays produced during the '70s at PAU, only one appears to have been Latino. Even if one were to "count" as Latino both the one-act play festival and the opera (production number sixty-eight), Latino-themed works would still not make up even five percent of the plays staged over the decade. Moreover, the only play that was

Latino with any certitude was not Mexican or Mexican American, but Colombian. This means, again, that throughout the '70s the publicly-funded theatre program at PAU appears not to have offered its students or the surrounding community even one play dealing with Mexican-American or even Mexican culture. Students at PAU, both Latino and otherwise, were thus denied an opportunity by theatre faculty to interpret roles, make costumes, and create sets that reflected the region's Mexican-American culture. There are many different ways of seeing the magnitude of this cultural exclusion and sensing its impact on students, their friends and their families. But the impact surely reached beyond the students and their financial and emotional supporters. What did this decade of favoring one culture over another (in a largely bi-cultural environment) *do* to the faculty members themselves; to the staff of the department; to the theatre patrons; and to the whole culture of the theatre program and its foundation for the future?

One must understand how ubiquitous was and is the presence of Mexican-American and Mexican culture in the border region of south Texas, as well as among the PAU students who are nearly all locals, to appreciate how emphatic was the exclusion of Latino plays by the PAU theatre faculty. Although the U.S. Census Bureau did not identify "Hispanics" prior to the '80s, there is no question that PAU and the surrounding region had a pronounced Latino presence in the '70s. As the authors of a 1984 study on Mexican Americans wrote about Hidalgo County: "The proximity to the border virtually ensures that the influences of Mexican culture and traditions will be great. There is a continuing immigration stream . . ." (783). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, which tends to undercount Latinos living near the border, Hidalgo County's population in 1980 was 85 percent Hispanic (Pew Research Center) (by 1990 the Hispanic population had grown to 88 percent; by 2010, 91%).

Students at PAU, which until the mid-1990s was the only institution of higher education in the area, were mostly Latino throughout the '70s. In the 1984 edition of the *Bulletin of Pan American University*, it states that 96% of the students are from the local area (13). In 1989, in their proposal for a new Master of Arts Program in Speech Communication, the Communications Department (formerly the Department of Speech and Drama) at PAU reported: "The Lower Rio Grande Valley is predominantly Hispanic with virtually all of that population being Mexican American, and Pan American University is the largest predominantly Hispanic institution in Texas and the nation. With over 81 percent of its students designated as Hispanic the institution is a reflection of the ethnic composition of the surrounding region" (8). From this document we see that faculty and administrators in the department were aware that Latinos made up the great majority of the local population and of the student body at their school. It also shows that they understood how exceptional these demographics were at the state and national levels.

Despite their having constituted a large majority at the university, is it possible that Latino students were marginalized at PAU in the '70s *generally* and that their culture was ignored in the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities, such as theatrical productions? While this question stirs up an important and complicated set of additional questions (that may not be addressed satisfactorily here), PAU in the '70s was certainly not guilty of anything resembling a blanket exclusion and marginalization of Latino students and culture. The student yearbooks from the period show a major, social presence of Latinos at the university and show them involved and Latino culture included in many events and honors. Latinos are recognized as beauty queens and as outstanding students and athletes.

By 1970, the civil rights movement had effectively challenged all kinds of institutional practices that were marginalizing minorities across the country, particularly in the field of education. This movement had reached the Rio Grande Valley and Hidalgo County.

Most notably, in 1968, there was a highly publicized walk-out of students at Edcouch-Elsa High School, located just to the east of Edinburg where PAU was located. More than one hundred Mexican-American students at the high school protested what they claimed was “blatant discrimination” and issued a set of “demands.” One of the demands made by the Mexican American Youth Organization on behalf of the protesters spoke to the paucity of content in the students’ courses relating to Latino culture: It “called for courses to be introduced as a regular part of the curriculum to show contributions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans to the state and region, including . . . courses in Mexican history and culture” (*Valley Morning Star* 1-2).

This watershed protest, which was covered by more than ninety local newspaper articles between November, 1968, and January, 1969, repeatedly and urgently reminded the public that the exclusion of Latino culture at educational institutions in Hidalgo County was a grievance for the many students and their supporters.

Another outbreak of local Chicano resistance came on the evening of February 6, 1971, in the town of Pharr, just south of Edinburg (and also in Hidalgo County). Hundreds gathered downtown to protest alleged abuses by local police in their treatment of Mexican Americans. The demonstration received national press coverage, in part, because a seventeen year-old boy, Alfonso Loredó Flores, an innocent bystander, was killed amidst the ensuing violence. These public events show that there was a heightened awareness during the early ‘70s in Hidalgo County of allegations of institutional discrimination and exclusion in regard to the local Latino community. Within the PAU academic community, too, the civil rights movement had arrived

and there was a lot of high-profile work in the areas of Latin American and Mexican-American studies. Cesar Chavez himself visited PAU on February 8, 1971, when he addressed faculty, students and staff. And in March, 1973, a major “Bilingual Education Conference” was held at the university. PAU professor Hubert Miller published a series of booklets, mostly during the ‘70s, to guide teachers wanting to cover the Mexican-American heritage. And PAU associate professor Sylvia Dominguez published a full-length play that she had written in Spanish entitled *La Comadre Maria* (1973). And in 1976, an assistant professor at PAU edited a collection of eight new Chicano plays entitled *Contemporary Chicano Theatre*, which was published by the University of Notre Dame Press. Of course, none of these plays were ever chosen for production at PAU. But they serve to show that Mexican-American studies and new Mexican-American plays, in particular, were areas of highly publicized interest in the academic community at PAU in the ‘70s.

But interest in Mexican-American studies also flourished outside the circles of protesters and academics. PAU yearbooks indicate that there was during the ‘70s a pervasive interest on campus in recognizing and celebrating the bicultural and bilingual heritage of the Rio Grande Valley. The university’s 1971 yearbook, *El Bronco*, for example, begins with an eloquent nod to the bicultural identity of the region and the school (still called Pan American College (PAC) in 1970): At PAC, two cultures unite . . . each student at Pan American represents the union of two schools of thought, of two ways of life, some choose according to merit, others choose according to bias” (17). And referring to the new architecture that was then transforming the PAC campus, the bicultural nature of the school is said to be central to the design: “The arch . . . a symbol . . . represents the fusion of two cultures . . . Mexican and American . . . Symbolic of a culture created by the merging of two languages, two races, two ideologies . . . Symbolic of . . . Pan American College: ‘A College for all the Americas’” (4-6).

Student organizations and extracurricular activities reflect an interest in Latino history and culture that had become prominent on campus by the early '70s. One student organization, the *Order of Bougainvillea*, had been founded (way back in 1961) with the mission to promote "the blending of two cultures" (*El Bronco* 1970 54). *El Bronco* 1971 announces that *MEChA*, a national Chicano organization, had arrived at PAC: "The *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* is a new organization on campus dedicated to the expression of Chicano culture in all its varied forms" (65). The goals of *MEChA* were stated as follows: "... to create a genuine awareness of Chicano culture, society and values among students. Members try to promote understanding and communication between Chicanos and Anglos" (65). And their listed activities include "presentations by the Teatro Chicano" (65). There was also *El Club de México* which "works to realize the goal of Pan American College . . . a blending of two cultures" (60). *El Bronco* 1970 reveals that theatrical works were among this club's activities, as well: "The club sponsored 'Teatro Club de México' at the Carnival of the Great Pumpkin in October" (56).

In addition to the Latino theatre productions by or under the auspices of the student organizations at PAU, a Spanish-language theatre group was active in the early '70s. Based in the Modern Languages Department, "El Teatro Español produces two plays a year with the casts made up of Spanish students" (*El Bronco* 1970 140) and their plays toured to area high schools and civic organizations. *El Bronco* 1971 records: "El Teatro Español is active with the production of annual plays that perform for audiences throughout the Rio Grande Valley" (150). Included in the yearbook is a picture of faculty member Sylvia M. Dominguez, author of the Spanish-language play mentioned earlier, who is shown leading a "Christmas show in Spanish" (150). The image shows performers without an actual stage, costumes or other technical support, with the exception of a few microphones and microphone stands.

Latino plays were produced at PAU in the early '70s, but only very rarely by its theatre program. They were produced instead by student groups or as an extension of Spanish classes; in other words, outside the official theatre arts programming at the university. This was similar to the situation I encountered when I was hired to teach theatre at UTPA (formerly PAU) some thirty years later, in 1999: very few Latino plays were being done by the theatre program, but a small group from the Modern Languages Department, called *Actúa*, would meet once each week to plan and prepare some Spanish-language stage productions; they had virtually no budget and little in the way of expertise or other basic support, such as a reliable rehearsal space. That group has since disbanded, but a new Spanish-language group based in the same department, and run by Dr. Edna Ochoa, is currently active. French-language theatricals have also been produced in recent years under the direction of Dr. Stella Behar.

Perhaps there is a connection between the exclusion of Latino works by the theatre program at PAU in the early '70s and the larger academic community's promotion of bicultural and bilingual awareness. One of the responses given to me by senior theatre faculty in 1999 (again, almost thirty years later) during my job interview, after I asked if the theatre program ever did Spanish-language works, was that they did few Latino works even in English because they were afraid that, as Anglos, they might be thought presumptuous for attempting to direct them. In other words, ethnic tensions may have played a role in sustaining an almost exclusively Anglo repertoire at PAU in the '70s. However, the real motives behind the exclusion of Latino plays is difficult to determine, especially over time; by 1999, and as late as 2010, junior faculty and lecturers were being advised by a senior faculty member not to propose Latino plays for the following year's season because "Hispanics don't go to the theatre."

Let's turn to the '80s. Seventy-eight plays were produced by the theatre program at PAU during the 1980s according to department records, but only two have Latino themes. *Man*

of *La Mancha*, presented in the spring of '86, is the hugely popular American musical by Dale Wasserman (book) that is loosely derived from the seventeenth century Spanish novel, *Don Quixote*, by Miguel de Cervantes. I think it would be fair to call this musical only superficially a Latino-themed work as it's so firmly mainstream American in spirit and style. The other Latino-themed play, *El Grande de Coca-Cola*, is actually a musical revue with slapstick, written by an ensemble of improvisational, comic actors. Set in Honduras, this campy revue has the slightest of ties to Latino culture and experience. And even if we "count" both works as Latino, we still find only two out of seventy-eight plays during the decade having Latino themes, or under three percent; not one play had Mexican-American or Mexican content.

To summarize, the total number of plays in the twenty-year period was one hundred and forty-six, and the total possible number of Latino-themed plays is five, or just under four percent. Only one play, *In the Right Hand of the Father*, is known to have been authored by a Latino writer, which puts Latino authorship at well under one percent, and that play was produced in '72; in the eighteen years that followed there appears not to have been even one play by a Latino author (out of 137 plays). The theatre program excluded Latino plays in spite of PAU's historic mission to "blend the two cultures." PAU's official "Institutional philosophy" appeared in the Bulletin of Pan American College for many years in the late '60s and early '70s. It began:

Pan American College is a democratic institution which is dedicated to the preservation and extension of responsible human freedom and to the enlightenment of the Rio Grande Valley community. / As such an institution, it is dedicated to the following: The belief that it is the obligation of Pan American College to help perpetuate the best of American cultural heritage and to blend

with it the outstanding features of Latin-American culture . . . (*Bulletin* 1971 n.p.)

In the '80s, a new mission or "purpose" appeared each year in the Bulletin: "the University commits itself to: reflecting and fostering the best features of the multi-cultural heritage of its location; promoting the exchange of ideas and persons to facilitate an understanding of community – local, state, national, and international; answering the needs of and encouraging service to the community . . ." (*Bulletin* 1983 3).

Some believe that in the old days people just didn't do Latino plays, but this is wrong. Latino plays in both English and Spanish were produced by the Speech Department at PAU (in earlier institutional forms) for decades and were popular (Roney 58-62). Beginning in the '90s the theatre program began to stage slightly more Latino plays than before, but not until around 2006 did UTPA's theatre program begin producing substantially more Latino works and with ever greater resources, and perhaps this will continue in the years to come.

But in the historical sweep between 1970 and 1990 the percentage of Latino plays actually declined as time went on, even as waves of new Mexican immigrants swelled the Latino population of the region, bringing it ever closer to its present standing at 91% (in Hidalgo County). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Spanish is spoken in about 85% of households in Hidalgo County. It seems strange that, if ethnic tensions in the early '70s are used to help explain play selection at the university, what would explain the continued exclusion of Latino plays throughout the '80s and beyond? At a university devoted to celebrating and exploring the dual nature of its community and student body, positioned as it is at the intersection of Latin American and North American cultures, why would the theatre faculty maintain a pattern of play selection that reduces one half of the duality to a tiny fraction? Why would a theatre program on the Mexican border not want its audiences to see

Latino life celebrated and represented on its stages? These questions point beyond the scope of this paper, which, now that it has reviewed the record of Latino play selection at UTPA in the 1970s and 1980s, has accomplished its stated goal.

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